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The Mirror

Why do college coaches get paid so much? Because a great coach can turn a program around (and boost attendance and donations).

Leadership makes a difference!

The year before Bruce Pearl came to The University of Tennessee to coach men's basketball, the team went 14-17. In Coach Pearl's first year, the team went 22-8, with the same players, who hadn't gotten any taller or any more gifted athletically.

The key to better team performance is better leadership.

Put another way, leadership performance precedes team performance.

So, if you want better *from* your team, figure out how to be better *for* your team.

Jim Collins says great leaders respond to success by looking out the window and giving credit to their teams and respond to failure by looking in the mirror and taking personal responsibility.

It all starts with leadership.

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Leadership Whac-A-Mole

Most process improvement efforts fail. Some fail quickly and some fizzle out over time, but most fail.

Here's what they typically look like:

1. A keenly attentive and deeply concerned manager spots a problem area.

2. The keen-and-deep manager focuses everybody's attention on that area, and everybody nods enthusiastically and agrees to follow a new process or execute better on the existing process that's currently being ignored.

3. Performance in that area improves.

4. Keen-and-deep turns his attention to a new area that needs improvement.

5. Keen-and-deep focuses everybody's attention on this new area, and everybody nods enthusiastically and agreeably.

6. Performance in the second area improves.

7. Simultaneously or shortly thereafter, performance in the first area falls back to its original problematic level.

8. Keen-and-deep scratches his head and wonders what happened.

9. The process repeats itself ad nauseam, and cynical employees start using terms like "flavor of the month."

Improvement efforts fail because they tend to be superficial – they focus on front-line people and processes, when the root cause is actually the company culture that drives behavior.

If front-line people are ignoring processes, it's because the company culture doesn't emphasize process discipline.

If front-line people are working in silos, it's because the company culture doesn't emphasize collaboration.

If front-line people change their focus regularly, it's because the company culture doesn't emphasize focus.

If you're tired of fixing one problem, watching another one pop up, and playing Leadership Whac-A-Mole, focus on improving your culture. It takes longer, but the results are substantially better.

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Urgency is Overrated

My son had a lame soccer coach one season, whose game-time coaching consisted almost entirely of screaming at the kids to "RUN FASTER!" Evidently, he thought the team would win if he could just convince them to try harder. He was wrong. The team lacked skills and lacked a game plan.

Fast forward to this week. Two executives from different companies tell me their companies would be more profitable if they could just get their employees to work with a greater sense of urgency. They're wrong, for the same reason that lame soccer coach was wrong.

Yes, there are times when extraordinary effort is the answer – these are called emergencies. And unless you're a hospital or a fire department, these ought to be the exception rather than the rule.

Most of the time, what your company needs is a good plan from leadership and skillful execution from your people.

What your company usually needs is flow, not urgency. (This is the organizational version of "working smarter, not harder.")

If leaders want more from their teams, then the *leaders* need to do something different: change the plan, improve some processes, do more training, increase empowerment, or provide more feedback and accountability.

Urging your people to "Work faster!" is not the answer.

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The Responder

I witnessed an interesting interaction today:

A well-intentioned Manager reports to his boss, "I spent five hours today trying to fix a problem in my department." (He was obviously expecting appreciation.)

Instead, his boss asks, "Why are you *personally* trying to fix the problem rather than finding someone else to fix it?"

Proudly, the Manager says, "Because I'm responsible for my department, so it's my job to fix the problem."

And the boss says, "You're responsible for making sure the problem gets fixed, *not* fixing it yourself."

There's an important lesson here:

There's a difference between *being responsible* and being *the responder*.

Fixing problems yourself may feel like the *fastest* option or the *only* option, but it's not the *scalable* or *sustainable* option.

You'll never extract yourself from the fire fight, if you keep fixing problems yourself.

Tips for Managers:

When you're faced with a problem, ask yourself:

1. Is there someone else in the organization getting paid to fix this sort of problem?

2. Is there someone I can train as I work on this problem myself?

3. Is there a process to put in place that will keep this problem from happening again?

Remember, you get paid for your *results*, not your *effort*.

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Focus

A company president hires me to work on communication with his management team.

In my get-to-know-you meeting with the team, I ask what the operational priorities are for the company. And the managers sort of cock their heads to the side and give me a Scooby-Doo, "Huh?"

So I ask, "Do you have a list of high-value projects that are important to the company's success?"

"Absolutely," the managers nod in unison.

"Great," I say. "How many projects are on the list?"

"120."

"Wow, that's a lot of projects. How much progress are you making on the list?"

"None at all! It's overwhelming. We don't even look at it anymore."

And I leave that meeting knowing communication is *not* their problem – it's *focus*.

Lessons for Leaders:

Focus is *really* important for an organization. Otherwise, busy becomes acceptable and mediocrity sets in.

Focus is *really* hard for a company president.

- Focus means admitting that the organization has limitations and can't do everything well. (Vulnerability)

- Focus means giving up on things that you're heavily invested in, but just aren't working. (Escalated Commitment)

- Focus means saying no to good ideas in order to stay on track. (Opportunity Cost)

- Focus means disappointing people whose initiatives don't make the cut. (Confrontation)

- Focus means making a choice and potentially taking the blame, rather than hiding safely behind no decision. (Personal Responsibility)

But focus is worth the effort. Focus is what makes excellence possible, for a company or an individual.